INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN STATE DOT WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Benchmarking Hiring Process Saves Time and Employees

As part of an initiative to improve hiring processes, the New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) Bureau of Human Resources used an ACCESS software database to create a tracking system that analyzes various stages of its internal hiring and selection process. The database quantified the days involved at each step of the process and identified areas to improve a process that, at the time of the study, averaged 79 days. Within three months of developing the analysis, the NHDOT instituted modifications and reallocated duties, which reduced the processing time to fill job vacancies by 50 percent. The improvements attracted the attention of other state agencies, and several have adapted and adopted it to improve their internal hiring processes.

The New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) uses Quality Council teams to address organizational or procedural issues. In 1997, the Quality Council challenged the NHDOT to improve its hiring practices. The concern was the length of time it was taking to fill vacant positions, which was then 79.02 days. This is three days longer than the average processing time identified in the *1999 Staffing Plan Survey of State Transportation Agencies*, a national survey of state transportation agencies sponsored by the New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department. The New Hampshire figure is based on straightforward hiring and does not include reclassified positions or other state personnel reviews.

The NHDOT, like most state transportation agencies, coordinates personnel actions through a central personnel office. This office also approves all requests to fill vacant positions throughout the state. To fill a position, the central office conducts an internal search of recently laid-off employees and posts a vacancy notice for qualified internal employees. Once candidates are identified, the Department uses hiring panels to review paperwork and interview and rank candidates. If there is no qualified internal applicant, the position is then advertised externally for two weeks, further adding to the time that a position remains vacant. As a result of the steps involved and the time necessary to announce a vacancy, accept applications, review qualifications, and interview candidates, it is easy see how the days become weeks, and the weeks stretch into months before a position is filled.

Compounding a lengthy process, at the time of the Quality Council team evaluation several other factors

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affected the DOT's ability to attract, hire, and retain qualified workers. These factors included a statewide 2 percent unemployment rate and competition from higher private sector salaries. Between the time to process applications, and a robust economy, qualified candidates often found and accepted other positions before the Department could make an offer.

The time required to fill a job vacancy also adversely affected NHDOT's productivity.

Hurry More

When the Quality Council identifies a concern, it establishes project teams whose members usually represent a cross section of state agencies. The Department, however, had a new Commissioner, a new Human Resources Administrator, and additional professional staff had also recently joined the agency. Thus, the Quality Council regarded NHDOT as having in-house skills necessary to

conduct a review of the NHDOT hiring practices, and it took the unusual step of selecting a team from NHDOT staff.

The team's initial response was to "hurry up faster," essentially an attempt to approach the issue of filling job vacancies as a customer service problem. It was soon apparent, however, that the approach was having little discernible effect on improving the time to fill vacancies or increasing productivity from lost work days.

Team members realized they needed a more systematic approach to analyzing specific problems before they could begin to use the quality improvement process to correct them.

Measuring the Process

As noted, the NHDOT had recently added staff to its human resources office. Many of those

employees came to the public sector from private industry. Fran Buczynski, the Bureau's new Administrator, came to the state agency after 14 years with a construction company. "I've seen both sides of the operation. State government has more structure, more levels of approval for decision making. The state also has strict limitations with wage structures based on employee qualifications and job classifications."

In late 1998, the NHDOT human resources staff decided to take a different approach. According to Ninder Singh, who was recently hired to process and post job vacancies, "We all knew that the system needed improvement," he says, "but we needed a place to begin, a logical starting point."

The group decided that its starting point would be to create a database that could track the process and allow staff to measure how an application moves through the system. Over the next six months, they began to construct an ACCESS database system to document the various stages of the internal hiring and selection process. They worked closely with the NHDOT's Information Technology Group, making adjustments and ensuring that the data captured were accurate. Data used to build the system essentially tracked the time for each step of the hiring processes and allowed the Bureau to measure "ownership" at each step and the length of time taken for each step. The information from the database established a benchmark that could be measured. Once measured,

processes could be improved. The information in the database provided a wake-up call to the Department—and to the State.

Reality versus Perception

Based on data collected, the NHDOT Bureau of Human Resources issued a report of the 1999 data. The report was given to all state bureau administrators and the state personnel office. Most problems were associated with the limitations and procedures required by the Department and statewide classification and merit systems.

The report refuted the perception that "gatekeepers" at the state personnel office and the Bureau of Human Resources were the barriers to an otherwise smooth-flowing process. The commonly held conviction that papers just "sit on someone's desk" too long before any action is taken was disproved. The database demonstrated that the gatekeeper function accounted for only 13 percent of total processing time.

The report identified the real impediments as the time lost in manually transferring paperwork through messenger and mail systems (almost 18 percent) and the time between when the Bureau posted vacancy announcements and coordinated candidate interviews (54 percent). The remaining time delay was attributed to the 14-day posting period.

Database results also identified the effect on the organization of extended position vacancies and lost work days. In 1999, unfilled vacancies cost the NHDOT 1,789 workdays, roughly the equivalent of almost five years of lost workdays in a single calendar year.

According to Fran Buczynski, "The report caught most of us by surprise. The numbers came from the various offices, not from us, and they clearly pointed to specific procedural steps needing improvement. I think that most of us simply hadn't thought about the amount of time involved at each step. The important lesson that the data provided was that we were spending too much time processing paper, when our job is to hire people."

Technical Solutions

Once the problem steps in the process were identified, staff went to work finding the solutions. Technology solved some of the time-delay problems involved with document transfer. For example, when the Bureau identified a vacancy to be filled, it sent a request to the Department's Executive Office requesting approval to post the vacancy. The Commissioner could only approve the request with an original signature.

The solution was to purchase software that uses an electronic signature. Now a request for approval is submitted electronically, signed electronically, and a mouse click forwards the form immediately back to the Bureau. A process that once took an average of six to seven days can now take less than four hours.

The NHDOT Bureau of Human Resources staff also reviewed the variety of standard forms used by various offices. They found that they were anything but standard. The answer was to revise forms to be more consistent. The Human Resources Office now posts most of these forms on the state's Intranet where they can be completed and submitted electronically. The state also accepts faxed applications that require an original signature.

Another time-saving modification involves the application required for all state jobs candidates. The state was unable to accept a résumé, which required that job applicants complete an official application form before they could be considered for employment or change in job status. This principally affected candidates from outside the agency who usually submitted résumés because they lacked access to the forms. NHDOT's Ninder Singh recalls that, "By the time we had a résumé from a good candidate, reviewed it, and sent the official application to the appointing authority in the district, it could mean five or six days. Often, by the time we could call candidates in for interviews, they often had other jobs."

Bureau staff worked with the state Division of Personnel to accept a résumé to review whether a candidate's credentials meet vacancy requirements. A candidate can now complete the official application form at the time of an interview so that the Bureau has it on record.

Bureau staff also worked with NHDOT district offices

to process vacant jobs notices more quickly. Now, rather than taking 30 days for the Department to list a vacancy; the average is 10 days. Another innovation is that departments can submit the request for permission to post a vacancy when an employee submits a resignation or there's a change in job status. For this reason, the Vacant to Request to Post column in the ACCESS database often reflects –12 or –9.76 days.

Within three months of tabulating the 1999 statistics and identifying problem areas, the NHDOT Bureau of Human Resources modified its processes and reallocated some duties. It has effectively reduced the time taken for manual mail processing of requests for approval by 41 percent. The result is a 50 percent reduction in the time needed to process job vacancy announcements and internal hiring.

More Information, More Quickly

Just committing to designing the database and collecting the information in it has generated an enthusiasm for "fixing" processes. Bureau staff has trained employees to use the database and a new internal tracking system for applications helps staff quickly access information and respond to questions from applicants about the status of applications. The Bureau also uses the system to track costs to advertise vacant positions and the responses.

In addition, NHDOT Bureau of Human Resources staff continues to reach out to employees, to offer help, provide the assistance that keeps employees current with technology changes and the recruitment and selection process stays on track.

According to Carol Murray, NHDOT Commissioner, "Change takes time, but over the last three years we've put the pieces together and we continue to define and redefine the system to make it better. Our staff plays a key role in improving the department and our ability to support customer servicing. They continually look for ways to improve how we do business. I've seen a real culture shift in our employees and a subsequent increase in morale."

More Challenges

The ACCESS database has given the NHDOT Bureau of Human Resources new tools to process and track information; it has also opened lines of communication among the various agencies and offices. Bureau staff continues to communicate information about system changes and updates and new training helps employees get the greatest benefit from the system and the best new employees for the Department.

Benchmarking the hiring process has helped the NHDOT save valuable time. Other New Hampshire State agencies have recognized the merit of the benchmarking system. Several are reviewing the system and two agencies have adopted it and adapted it to meet their needs.

One of the other things that Bureau personnel learned from the process is that change is constant.

As Fran Buczynski observes, "Procedures change; needs change. We can't do things the same way each year. Our Quality Council team had expected that the database project would help us identify hiring procedures that would lead to publishing a hiring manual. But we've learned that hiring trends change so quickly that such a manual would be out of date before it was published.

"The study that resulted in the database provided a benchmark, something that helped us evaluate where we were. It gave us the benchmark by which we can measure our progress. There has been a lot of progress, but we have a lot more work ahead of us."

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